

V COLOQUIO ARGENTINO DE LA IADA
Cohesión y Coherencia en la Interacción Verbal Oral

La Plata, Argentina | 12 y 13 de octubre de 2010

PRESENTACIÓN

TOPIC CHANGE IN CASUAL CONVERSATION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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RESUMEN

This study is part of the Cohesion and Coherence in Casual Conversation research project (UNLP), which aims to contribute to the description of casual conversation, drawing on a range of approaches to provide a theoretical framework that can help explain the complexities of informal talk. When speakers engage in casual conversation, they do not have a prescribed topic agenda to follow. Given the symmetrical nature of the relation among participants, speakers are free to change, shift, drift, digress or resume topics (Stenström, 1994). The focus of this study is on topic change and topic shift and some of the strategies employed by speakers to introduce a new topic or move away from the current one. Our data consists of 15 dialogues drawn from the ECAr (Español Coloquial de Argentina) corpus, a collection of 52 informal conversations recorded between 2000 and 2010, involving male and female university students who know each other prior to the recordings. Results obtained by means of qualitative analysis show that speakers make different Mood choices (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) often employing a range of markers to change or shift topic which belong either in the textual or interpersonal theme (Eggins, 2004).

INTRODUCTION

This study is part of the Cohesion and Coherence in Casual Interaction research project (2010-2013). This project, which is in its early stages, aims to contribute to the description of casual conversation, drawing on a range of approaches to provide a theoretical framework that can help explain the complexities of informal talk.

Casual or informal conversation is to be understood as the kind of talk that people engage in when they are talking simply for the sake of talking (Eggins & Slade, 1997: 6).

AIM OF THIS STUDY

A first reading of the dialogues in our corpus revealed that speakers frequently changed topics, on occasions to introduce a completely new one, on others to shift to a minor topic that could be subsumed within the major topic. In some cases, this was signalled in some way, in others it was not.

We became interested in the change of topic occurring in the dialogues and how speakers managed to do so without seeming to disrupt the dialogue's overall coherence. Therefore, we set out to explore how participants changed topics in the course of conversing and whether they employed certain recurrent strategies to that effect.

In this study we attempted to answer the following questions:

- How frequently did participants change topic?
- What Mood choices did they make when changing topic?
- How frequently did participants signal a change of topic?
- Which markers were commonly used?
- What was the pragmatic effect when a change of topic was signalled/not signalled?

Our hypothesis was that even though participants knew each other well and would therefore not feel compelled to announce a change explicitly, the move from one topic to another would be marked in some way. Failure to signal a change might be perceived as a disruption in the flow of the interaction, with subsequent threat to topic continuity and overall coherence.

We also hypothesised that signals of topic change would be more explicit when the topic was changed for a new one (topic change) rather than when the speakers moved imperceptibly from one subtopic to another (topic shift).

CORPUS

The data for this study was drawn from the ECAR (Español Coloquial de Argentina) corpus, which was collected between 2000 and 2010 and which consists of 52 dyadic and multiparty conversations, involving male and female university students, aged 18 to 28 who knew each other prior to the recording. The conversations were audio taped (some were also filmed) in different settings by the participants themselves, who were told that the conversations were going to be used for linguistic research purposes, but were given no clue as to the exact na-

ture of the investigation. Participants were instructed to hold a conversation about topics of interest to them for about 20-30 minutes. Conversations recorded in this way were then transcribed and codified.

For our present analysis, we randomly selected 15 conversations from the ECAR corpus.

Although participants engaged in casual conversation do not have any clear pragmatic purpose, they can most of the time be perceived to be working collaboratively towards a common end: the establishing of social roles and relationships. While this kind of talk is, in appearance, purposeless and trivial, research into casual conversation has revealed that it is not necessarily so and that speakers employ numerous strategies to achieve their communicative goals (Carranza, 1998; Eggins & Slade, 1997; Taboada, 2004).

In the course of conversing, participants bring up topics belonging to areas of common interest to those involved. Since participants do not have a prescribed agenda scheduling the topics to be dealt with, they negotiate them as the conversation progresses. It is for the participants to agree upon which topics are to be taken up, developed, dropped or resumed at a later stage. Participants make use of different strategies to make this happen and very frequently signal their intention to change or shift topic, drawing from a repertoire of markers such as "Well", "By the way", "And" etc.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The notion of topic adopted in this study is the one proposed by Brown and Yule (1983): topic is "what is being talked about", that is, there is not a single static topic of conversation but one which is subjected to negotiation by participants.

Stenström (1994) suggests that participants in a conversation change topics in different ways. They may abandon the current topic in favour of a new unrelated one (topic change). They may move from one topic to a related one or from one aspect of the current topic to another (topic shift). Some times the current topic is left aside temporarily in favour of a new one (topic digress) and resumed at a later stage (topic resume).

As conversation inevitably covers a variety of topics, topic change becomes a constitutive part of conversation (Chen & Cegala, 1994: 394). Studies of coherence in dialogue confirm that, when holding a conversation, people pursue, among others, the goal of being coherent. Topic change can disrupt the flow of interaction. One way in which speakers can achieve coherence is by a proper use of topic shifting devices (Crow, 1983).

Discourse markers or Pragmatic Expressions (Carranza, 1998) serve a pragmatic and a textual function. The way speakers change topic is interpretable in interpersonal terms. Forms such as "*bueno (well)*", "*viste (did you see)*", "*che*

(hey)”, which lack semantic content, reveal aspects of the social relation between participants and help create textual coherence.

According to Functional Systemic Linguistics, the system of grammatical choice offers speakers the possibility of selecting between a declarative, an interrogative and an imperative (Eggins, 2004). When speakers change or shift topic they choose from this system to carry out their communicative goals.

When speakers make use of linguistic elements from the system of lexical choice to signal a change of topic, these naturally appear in thematic position, constituting a Marked Theme. For functional linguists, unusual word order serves an additional communicative function. Montemayor-Borsinger (2009) suggests that one use of Marked Theme is to indicate a change in the flow of discourse.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

For this study, we restricted our search to topic change and topic shift, which seemed to occur more frequently than, for example, digressions. We analysed each of the selected conversations, and identified each instance of topic change and topic shift.

We transcribed the fragment where the topic change or shift occurred to allow us to look at each occurrence in context and described the topic in each case (what the speakers seemed to be talking about).

As topic change can be perceived as a break in coherence, we thought a speaker wishing to change the current topic would be forced to acknowledge the fact that they were about to change and signal it explicitly to their interlocutor. Therefore, we took note of any relevant marker occurring in the vicinity (before or after) the actual instance of topic change/shift, such as vocatives, attention getters etc.

Our grid looked as follows:

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047 2010 IMIH - Ale and Fer				
FRAGMENT	TOPIC DESCRIPTION	TOPIC START	MOOD CHOICE (+ MARKER)	COMMENTS
Fer: Mh Ale: ¿Cuánto está la entrada al cine? <i>How much is a cinema ticket?</i> Fer: Cara. <i>It's expensive</i> ¿Veintiii..cinco? <i>¿Twenty-five?</i>	Price of cinema ticket	¿Cuánto está la entrada al cine? <i>How much is a cinema ticket?</i>	interrogative	Topic shift
Ale: ¿Con quién fuiste la última vez al cine? <i>Who did you go to the cinema with last time?</i> Fer: Con Juje y con Rochi. <i>With Juje and Rochi</i>	Last time at cinema	¿Con quién fuiste la última vez al cine? <i>Who did you go to the cinema with last time?</i>	interrogative	
¿Vos cuando rendís en la facultad así cambiando de tema? ¿no? <i>When do you have exams at university, by the way?</i> Fer: En Junio. <i>In June</i>	Dates of mid-term tests at university	¿Vos cuándo rendís en la facultad así cambiando de tema? ¿no? <i>When do you have exams at university, by the way?</i>	Interrogative followed by marker: cambiando de tema	
Ale: En junio. ¿Y te cae en tu cumpleaños? Esperemos que no. <i>And does it fall on the same day as your birthday? Let's hope not.</i> Fer: No creo que XXX la primera fecha.... <i>No I think XXX the first date</i>	Dates of mid-term tests and birthday	¿Y te cae en tu cumpleaños? <i>And does it fall on the same day as your birthday?</i>	Interrogative preceded by Y	

Our analysis revealed that speakers made different Mood choices (interrogative, declarative and exclamative) to change or shift from one topic to another. We entered the results in a table, as follows:

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Table 1

MOOD CHOICE	NUMBER OF OCCURRENCES
Interrogatives	139 (49 %)
Declaratives	126 (46 %)
Exclamatives	14 (5 %)

We decided to leave out exclamatives in view of their low frequency of occurrence.

We then looked at occurrences of declaratives and interrogatives for topic change and topic shift separately. Table 2 shows the total number of occurrences and percentages for each:

Table 2

	INTERROGATIVES	DECLARATIVES
Topic shift	51 %	49 %
Topic change	49 %	51 %

As Table 2 shows, interrogatives were used slightly more frequently than declaratives to shift topic and declaratives were used slightly more frequently to change topic, but the difference in number was not greatly significant in either case.

Our next step was to look for the presence or absence of markers helping to signal topic change or topic shift, occurring in combination with interrogatives or declaratives.

Table 3

	SIGNALLED BY MARKER	NOT SIGNALLED
Topic shift	80 %	20 %
Topic change	73 %	27 %

As Table 3 shows, topic changes and topic shifts were signalled on a significant number of occasions.

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We then divided every instance of topic shift/ change into Theme and Rheme (see Table 4 for an example). We analysed Theme following Eggins (2004: 300), who distinguishes between textual Theme, interpersonal Theme and marked and unmarked experiential Theme. The first two themes are optional in the clause, therefore, if they are present, it is because the speaker has deliberately chosen to use them for a particular purpose. In our corpus, continuity adjuncts “Bueno (*well*)”, “ay”, “uy” and conjunctive adjuncts “Y (*and*)”, “Pero (*but*)” as well as vocatives such as “Che (*hey*)” often appear in thematic position at topic shift and topic change points.

Table 4

	THEME				RHEME
	Textual	Interpersonal	Experiential marked	Experiential Unmarked	
					(001) 2000-IIM
1	Bueno			Cuéntame	Algo de tu facultad
Shift	Y bueno		Ahí		Está el centro de estudiantes
Shift				Nosotros	El principal problema que tenemos
		ponele		Que tenemos	

In view of the scope of this study, the effects of intonation as a signal of topic change were not considered, not because of disregard for the importance of prosodic clues in that respect but because of the complexities it would have added to our exploratory investigation.

Our final step was to interpret the results, looking into the pragmatic effect produced by the speakers’ choice of Mood and the presence or absence of topic change and topic shift markers.

DISCUSSION

In the conversations analysed, we have not observed meaningful contrasts in the speakers’ Mood choices at the moment of changing or shifting topics. Eggins and Slade (1997) state that the most significant example of the unevenness of talk is found in the speakers’ choice of clause types. Therefore, the evenness in number in the choice of declaratives or interrogatives to change or shift topic in the selected conversations might reflect the participants’ wish to enact equal social roles.

Using interrogatives to shift or change topic may be interpreted as an effort on the part of speakers to be heard as suggesting a shift or change of topic in a more tentative, interactive way rather than imposing a topic by using a declarative. By using an interrogative such as:

(017) 2006 II M

¿Y qué hacemos en Navidad?

And what shall we do on Christmas Day?

The speaker changes the subject in a way which is less disruptive, giving their interlocutor the option of taking the turn and, if they wish, of changing the course of the interaction once more.

In non-hierarchical dyads, the balance of power at the moment of changing topics may be kept even by alternating between suggesting in a non-imposing face-saving manner and imposing a topic.

The higher number of instances of topic change and topic shift in which markers of some kind were used confirmed our hypothesis that speakers would try to avoid any possible instance of incoherence they might be held accountable for when trying to change or shift topic by using an explicit marker to indicate the change.

We have also found that a great percentage of the instances of topic shift or topic change were signalled by textual adjuncts. These adjuncts, which can be omitted without affecting the structural completeness of the clause do, however, play an important part in the overall coherence of the interaction. The textual adjunct most frequently used in our corpus to introduce a topic shift is the conjunction “Y (*and*)”. Its use seems to reflect an effort on the part of the speaker to connect a forthcoming chunk of discourse with the preceding one, even when the connection is non-existent, so that they might be heard as continuing the topic flow.

Example 1. (049) 2010-IHIM

146 M: ¿Vos seguís con rugby?

147 G: Sí más o menos porque por que estoy lesionado más o menos desde octubre del
148 año pasado. Creo que del 2007 vengo con una secuencia de lesiones que

149 M: ¿Y qué te lesionaste?. ¿No te habías lesionado el dedo?

150 G: Y en el 2007 ...me 200..7 me lesioné, me me fracturé el dedo que me tuve que
151 operar

146 M: Do you still play rugby?

147 G: Yes, sort of because because I have been injured since about last October. I think
148 I've had a sequence of injuries that

149 M: **And** what did you hurt? Hadn't you hurt your finger?

150 G: Well in 2007 ...I 200..7 I hurt, I broke my my finger which had to be
151 operated on

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As regards interpersonal adjuncts, those most frequently used to introduce a new topic or to make a move from one aspect of the current topic to another, were the vocative “Che (*hey*)” and the pronoun “Vos (informal second person singular/ *you*)”. With only one exception, the vocative “Che” was found to introduce a new topic. The speaker uses it as a way of acknowledging that they are not being relevant to what is being talked about, at the same time as they are trying to call the listeners’ attention to what they are about to say.

Example 2. (023) 2006 II H

43 M: Yo me acuerdo los sandwiches, la hamburguesa que tenían acá aaaaa glup

44 F: ahhh ahhh gr.

45 M: Si

46 F: No está bien

47 M: **Che**, el otro día estaba pensando como me habías contado vos una operación
48 que tuviste en el hombro...

43 M: I remember the sandwiches, the hamburger they had here aaaaa glup

44 F: ahhh ahhh gr

45 M: Yes

46 F: no it's ok.

47 M: **Hey**, the other day I was thinking how you had told me about an operation
you

48 had on the shoulder.

However, signals of topic change were not necessarily more explicit when the topic was changed for a new one than when a topic shift occurred. According to the results obtained and contrary to what we expected, instances of topic shift appeared to be marked on more occasions than instances of topic change.

The fact that speakers signalled a change of topic or a topic shift using an explicit marker on more occasions than they did not might reveal a tendency towards trying to sound relevant and coherent and to be heard as polite (in conversational terms) towards their interlocutor by warning them of the imminent change.

CONCLUSIONS

This exploratory study has revealed that when changing or shifting topics in casual conversation,

- speakers choose interrogatives and declaratives in almost equal numbers. By doing this, they might be attempting to enact equal social roles.

- Speakers usually make use of linguistic resources to announce the change to their interlocutor. By doing this, they may be attempting to do cohesive work which can connect the utterance to the preceding context. This may reveal an effort on the part of the speaker to be relevant and to maintain coherence.
- The most commonly used markers of topic change in our corpus are the conjunction “Y (and)”, which contributes to overall coherence by connecting an utterance to a preceding discourse, and the vocative “Che (hey)”, used by speakers to introduce a new topic and to draw the interlocutor’s attention to the forthcoming discourse. Both markers appear in thematic position at topic change and topic shift points.

We hope that our findings, even if minimal, will contribute to the characterization of the immensely rich and largely unexplored area of casual talk.

Our next step will be to pursue our analysis of topic change in casual conversation using a larger corpus.

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